



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The Robert H. Robinson Library

Alexandria Times, April 30, 2020

Image: Exterior of the Robert H. Robinson Library.

The opening of the Robert H. Robinson Library occurred less than a year after the Aug. 21, 1939 Alexandria Library sit-in and less than four months after Judge William Pape Woolls' ruling on the writ of mandamus filed by Samuel Wilbert Tucker on behalf of Sgt. George Wilson.

Acting as Wilson's attorney, Tucker had completed Wilson's application for library privileges at the Alexandria Library. Judge Woolls ruled that if Wilson had completed the library application himself and provided proof of his residence in Alexandria, the Alexandria Library librarian would have been obliged to grant his request for a library card.

Woolls' ruling shocked the Alexandria Library board of directors and city council members who realized the decision would open the doors of the library to African American Alexandrians. In fact, within two days of the court ruling, two African Americans applied for library cards. Dorothy Pierce was the first applicant.

The Alexandria Library board of directors and city council rushed to construct a separate-and-unequal branch library for the city's African American citizens to circumvent integration of the whites-only Alexandria Library.

The name of the Robert H. Robinson Library was chosen by city council to honor a Methodist minister and formerly enslaved man, who was the grandson of Caroline Branham, Martha Washington's personal maid. Ward Brown, the architect for the structure, designed a one-room Colonial-style brick building on the corner of Wythe and North Alfred streets.

The total cost for the new branch included \$2,500 for construction expenses, \$750 for the purchase of the site, \$1,941.50 for books and equipment and \$1,750 for annual operating costs – considerably less than the cost to build, stock and maintain the city's white library.

The Robert H. Robinson Library opened for patron inspection on April 23, 1940 and the next day patrons began registering for library cards. The first full-time librarian was Evelyn Roper Beam, a highly qualified African American woman with superb credentials. Nevertheless, she was paid only \$720 per year. By contrast, Ellen Coolidge Burke, the white, part-time Alexandria Library Assistant Librarian and Cataloger was paid \$1,940.00 per year.

The first collection of books at the Robinson Library totaled approximately 1,500 volumes, the majority of which were castoffs from the Alexandria Library or donated, used books. Few new books were purchased for the library. Robinson Library patrons also had borrowing privileges from the Alexandria





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Library, but their selections had to be retrieved for them and returned to the main library by Beam because they were not allowed into the library to acquire the books themselves. To serve their research needs, they could borrow reference books overnight, but these, too, had to be retrieved and returned by Beam.

The majority of Robinson Library patrons were elementary school and high school students who used the library's resources to complete their schoolwork. Adults, however, were also library cardholders. In addition to assisting with class assignments, the Robinson Library offered story hours and activities for children. Adults participated in a reading club and also used the library for community meetings and social events.

The Robinson Library continued to serve the needs of African American Alexandrians, despite overcrowded conditions, until February 1959 when the Alexandria Library quietly integrated for African American adults and high school students. Children continued to be served by the Robinson Library until July 1962 when the Alexandria Library was fully integrated.

From 1962 until 1969, the Robinson Library served as the city's Bookmobile Station. In 1983, the facility that previously functioned as the Robinson Library became the Alexandria Black History Resource Center. Beginning in 1984, the Center underwent a renovation that lasted until 1989. In 2004, the Black History Resource Center was renamed the Alexandria Black History Museum.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria. This week's article was written by guest contributor Brenda Mitchell-Powell, PhD